Science Matters: Nature imposes the real bottom line

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Body

In December, Canadian specialty TV channel Business News Network interviewed me about the climate summit in Copenhagen. My six-minute interview followed a five-minute live report from Copenhagen, about poor countries demanding more money to address climate change and rich countries pleading a lack of resources. Before and after those spots were all kinds of reports on the Dow Jones Industrial Average, the price of gold and the loonie, and the implications of some new phone technology.

For me, this brought into sharp focus the inevitable failure of our negotiating efforts on climate change. BNN, like the New York-based Bloomberg channel, is a 24-hour-a-day network focused completely on business. These networks indicate that the economy is our top priority. And at Copenhagen, money dominated the discussions and the outcome.

But where is the 24-hour network dealing with the biosphere? As biological creatures, we depend on clean air, clean water, clean soil, clean energy, and biodiversity for our well-being and survival. Surely protecting those fundamental needs should be our top priority and should dominate our thinking and the way we live. After all, we are animals and our biological dependence on the biosphere for our most basic needs should be obvious.

The economy is a human construct, not a force of nature like entropy, gravity, or the speed of light or our biological makeup. It makes no sense to elevate the economy above the things that keep us alive. But that's what our prime minister does when he claims we can't even try to meet the Kyoto targets because that might have a detrimental effect on the economy.

This economic system is built on exploiting raw materials from the biosphere and dumping the waste back into the biosphere. And conventional economics dismisses all the "services" that nature performs to keep the planet habitable for animals like us as "externalities". As long as economic considerations trump all other factors in our decisions, we will never work our way out of the problems we've created.

We often describe the triple bottom line - society, economy, and environment - as three intersecting circles of equal size. This is nonsense. The reality is that the largest circle should represent the biosphere. Within that, we have 30 million species, including us, that depend on it. Within the biosphere circle should be a much smaller circle, which is human society, and within that should be an even smaller circle, the economy. Neither of the inner circles should grow large enough to intersect with the bigger ones, but that's what's happening now as human societies and the economy hit their limits.

We also draw lines around property, cities, provinces, and countries. We take these so seriously that we are willing to fight and die to protect those borders. But nature pays no attention to human boundaries. Air, water, soil that blows across continents and oceans, migrating fish, birds and mammals, and windblown seeds cannot be managed

within human strictures, yet all the discussions in Copenhagen were centred on countries that, in turn, were divided into rich and poor. In science-fiction movies where an alien from outer space attacks and kills humans, national differences disappear as we join forces to fight a common enemy. That is what we have to tap into to meet the climate crisis.

Nature is our home. Nature provides our most fundamental needs. Nature dictates limits. If we are striving for a truly sustainable future, we have to subordinate our activities to the limits that come from nature. We know how much carbon dioxide can be reabsorbed by all the green things in the oceans and on land, and we know we are exceeding those limits. That's why carbon is building up in the atmosphere. So our goal is clear. All of humanity must find a way to keep emissions below the limits imposed by the biosphere.

The only equitable course is to determine the acceptable level of emissions on a global per capita basis. Those who fall below the line should be compensated for their small carbon footprint while those who are far above should be assessed accordingly. But the economy must be aligned with the limits imposed by the biosphere, not above them.

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